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SUBJECT: CODEL SPECTER MEETS WITH SYRIAN FOREIGN MINISTER
WALID MUALLEM

REF: DAMASCUS 2

Classified By: Classified by CDA Todd Holmstrom for reasons 1.4 b and d
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11. (C) SUMMARY: Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem pleaded for the United States not to hold Syria "hostage" to events in Lebanon or to resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while insisting to Senator Arlen Specter and Representative Patrick Kennedy that Syria itself was ready for peace with Israel. He outlined the three steps necessary to reach an agreement on restarting an Israel-Syria peace track. Muallem reviewed in detail Syria's cooperation with the French on an agreement in Lebanon, and said the Lebanese now must take action if the current crisis is to be resolved. Muallem commented that the SARG was now done collaborating with the French to negotiate a Lebanese political solution. Discussion also covered Syria's relations with Hamas and Hezbollah, returning captured Israeli soldiers to Israel, restarting intelligence cooperation with the United States, Iraq, U.S. Embassy security, and human rights in Syria, including the recent jailing of members of the opposition.
END SUMMARY.

12. (U) On December 29, FM Muallem met for 90 minutes with Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA) and Representative Patrick Kennedy (D-RI). The Senator and Muallem had met previously on numerous occasions, both in Damascus and during Muallem's tenure as Syrian Ambassador in Washington, and share a warm rapport. The Charg d'Affaires and an Embassy notetaker attended at the delegation's request.

Three Steps Toward Syria-Israel Peace

13. (C) Specter opened the meeting by stressing the unique opportunity available to the Syrians to pursue a peace treaty with Israel thanks to a convergence of circumstances. First, President Bush was ready to play a larger role in the peace process, according to Specter. Second, Specter said Olmert was waiting for a signal from Syria to restart a Syria track. FM Muallem reviewed his long personal involvement with Syria-Israel negotiations starting from 1991. As a sign of the SARG's goodwill and desire to avoid meddling in internal Israeli politics, Muallem said Ron Lauder called him two days

previously to tell Muallem he was empowered to restart their track-two discussions, but Muallem told him no, "you are Bibi's man." (Note: Ron Lauder, son of Estee Lauder, was involved in previous informal negotiations, which achieved 95 percent of an agreement, according to Muallem. End Note.)

14. (C) FM Muallem then outlined for Specter and Kennedy a three-step plan toward restarting peace negotiations with Israel involving Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan as the initial mediator.

-- First, Israel must commit in advance to full withdrawal from the Golan to the June 4, 1967 line upon signing of a peace treaty. Israel would ideally make this promise or "deposit" to the United States to hold as guarantor, but Syria was willing to consider another third party, according to Muallem.

-- Second, Turkish PM Erdogan would broker two rounds of indirect preliminary discussions between Syria and Israel to set the modalities for face-to-face negotiations.

-- Third, PM Erdogan would travel to Washington to inform President Bush the parties were ready to begin negotiations and ask President Bush to publicly announce sponsorship of direct Syria-Israel negotiations.

FM Muallem said PM Erdogan had already started the process to restart an Israel-Syria peace track. Muallem insisted because prior negotiations had resolved 95 percent of an agreement, a final peace treaty could be concluded quickly.

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Don't Hold Syria Hostage to Lebanon, Hezbollah, Hamas

15. (C) Turning to Lebanon, Specter and Kennedy told FM Muallem the USG rejected Syria's claim it had no influence on the current political crisis in Lebanon. Specter said, "rightly or wrongly," Syria would be blamed for the continuing Lebanese political crisis. To emphasize the SARG's efforts to positively influence the situation, FM Muallem said Lebanese President Lahoud asked Asad what he should do before leaving office. Asad, according to Muallem, told Lahoud not to form a second government, which Lahoud had asserted he had the constitutional authority to do, but instead step down. Muallem reviewed in detail Syria's cooperation with the French to facilitate an agreement in Lebanon. He said Syria reluctantly entered into partnership with the French under three conditions, all of which were agreed to by the GoF.

-- The result must be a consensus, national unity government, not majority rule.

-- The United States must remain neutral and not interfere; Muallem said Syria would not "face Americans in Lebanon."

-- France, as the mediator, would remain neutral and maintain a distance from all parties.

16. (C) Muallem characterized the resulting negotiations as "more difficult than peace talks with Israel." He gave the Senator a copy of a Syrian/French proposal, supposedly concluded on December 28 and presented to parties in Lebanon the same day. Muallem said it was now time for the Lebanese to take, leave, or modify the proposed agreement, saying it was "their country, their decision." Muallem implied the SARG was now washing its hands of any further collaboration with the French on the current crisis.

17. (C) Muallem said it was a mistake for the USG to link the possibility of restarting a Syria-Israel peace track, or the Syria-U.S. relationship, to the situation in Lebanon or the

activities of Hezbollah or Hamas. He pleaded not to hold Syria "hostage to Sa'ad Hariri or Nasrallah." Muallem said once Syria had achieved peace with Israel, but not before, it would be able to play the role of peacemaker in the region.

Foreign Fighters, Intelligence Cooperation, Human Rights

¶8. (C) Muallem stressed Syria was directly affected by the lack of security in the region, citing the presence of Iraqi, Lebanese, and Palestinian refugees in Syria. He highlighted Syrian efforts to prevent foreign fighters from entering Iraq from Syria and Syria's security cooperation with Iraq. Regarding intelligence cooperation with the United States, Muallem asked Specter how the SARG could resume this cooperation in the absence of any political dialogue? Growing increasingly agitated, Muallem expressed Syria's dissatisfaction with the hosting of the "so-called opposition" at the White House and President Bush's statement at his end-of-year press conference that he had long ago lost patience with the Syrian regime.

¶9. (C) The tenor of the meeting abruptly turned negative when Kennedy queried Muallem about human rights and freedom of speech, and asked why Syria had jailed members of the Damascus Declaration National Council (see reftel). Muallem said Syria only arrested opposition members if they had "relations with foreign powers." Kennedy said he would send a letter protesting these arrests and the lack of transparency about the situation in Syrian prisons. Muallem offered to respond with a letter citing Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, and the U.S. "flying prisons."

Return of Israeli Soldiers, U.S. Embassy Security

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¶10. (C) Specter and Kennedy pressed for the return of Israeli soldiers held by Hamas and Hezbollah, and asked what Syria could do to help. Muallem said Egypt was negotiating with Hamas for the return of Israeli soldier Shalit, while the Germans were negotiating with Hezbollah on the return of Ron Arad and the two other soldiers captured by Hezbollah. Muallem said a prisoner exchange was the only solution and cited the 11,000 or more Palestinians in Israeli jails.

¶11. (C) Specter raised the issue of security for the U.S. Embassy and the proposed relocation to a more secure compound. Muallem seemed surprised no action had been taken in the last year and asked a staff member to look into the issue.

¶12. (U) Codel Specter did not clear this cable prior to departing Post.
HOLMSTROM